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Noam Chomsky has been described, justifiably, as the leading American (leftist) dissident, and his argument against what he calls the "withdrawal thesis" (see "Vain Hopes, False Dreams," Z, Oct. 1992) is a serious challenge to those who believe Kennedy was killed because he was planning to withdraw from Vietnam.

Although I have the greatest admiration for Chomsky and agree with him on most other issues, I think he is dead wrong here, and his argument is flawed. First of all, although it may be true that some biographers and assassination researchers are JFK "hagiographers," as Chomsky puts, one need not deny that Kennedy was as ruthless a cold warrior as any other president to acknowledge that he had decided to withdraw from Vietnam. Reagan's decision to withdraw from Lebanon doesn't make him a secret dove, either.

Secondly, the withdrawal "thesis" is not a thesis but a fact, amply documented in the Gravel edition of the Pentagon Papers ("Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces, 1962-1964," Vol. 2, pp. 160-200). Since Chomsky himself co-edited Vol. 5, I am surprised that avoids mentioning that this PP account states clearly that "the policy of phase out and withdrawal and all the plans and programs oriented to it" ended "de jure" in March 1964 (p. 198; my emphasis). It is also clear from the PP that the change in the withdrawal policy occurred after the assassination:

> The only hint that something might be different from on-going plans came in a Secretary of Defense memo for the President three days prior to this NSC meeting [on Nov. 26]....In early December, the President [Johnson] began to have, if not second thoughts, at least a sense of uneasiness about Vietnam. In discussions with his advisors, he set in motion what he hoped would be a major policy review... (p. 191).

There can be no question, then, if we stick to the record, as Chomsky rightly insists we do, that Kennedy had decided and planned to pull out, had begun to implement those plans, and that Johnson subsequently reversed them.

The thesis which Chomsky is actually arguing against is his own formulation: that JFK wanted "withdrawal without victory." This is wordplay, but important wordplay. It is true that the withdrawal plan was predicated on the assumption of military success, but Chomsky, who is also the world's most famous linguist, should not have to be reminded that an assumption is not a condition. There is a difference between saying "The military campaign is progressing well, and we should be able to withdraw by the end of 1965," which is how I read the McNamara-Taylor report and Kennedy's confirmation of it in NSAM 263, and "If we win the war, we will withdraw," which is how Chomsky reads the same documents.

We do not know what Kennedy may have secretly wanted or what he would have done if he had lived. Whether he really believed the war was going well, as the record indicates, or privately knew it was not, as John Newman contends (in *JFK and Vietnam*, NY: Warner Books, 1992), is also unknowable. What we do know, from the record, Chomsky notwithstanding, is that Johnson reversed the withdrawal policy sometime between December 1963 and March 1964.

The point is crucial. If one manages to say, as Chomsky and others (Michael Albert in *Z*, Alexander Cockburn in *The Nation*) do, that in truth there was no change in policy, that in fact there never was a withdrawal policy but only a withdrawal policy conditional on victory (until after Tet), and that therefore Johnson and Nixon simply continued what Kennedy started, then the question of the relation of the policy change (since there wasn't one) to the assassination does not arise.

If, however, one states the facts correctly, the question is unavoidable. Exactly when Johnson reversed the policy, and whether he did so because conditions changed, or because perceptions of conditions changed, or for whatever reason, is beside the point. Why do Chomsky et al. avoid the straightforward formulation which is nothing but a summary of the PP account? PP: JFK thought we were winning, so he planned to withdraw; Johnson decided that we weren't, so he killed the plan.

The reason is clear. Once you admit that there was a radical policy change in the months following the assassination, whether that change was a reaction to a (presumed) change in conditions or not, you must ask if the change was related to the assassination, unless you are a fool. Then, like it or not, you are into conspiracy theory--which is anathema to the leftist intellectual tradition that Chomsky represents.

Thus Chomsky, uncharacteristically, is telling us the same thing the government, the mass media, and Establishment historians have been telling us for almost thirty years--that the assassination had no political significance. The withdrawal plan was never a secret, but the overwhelming majority of historians have simply ignored those forty pages in the Gravel PP (also carefully circumscribed in the New York Times edition of the PP), treating the Kennedy-Johnson Vietnam policy as a seamless continuum, exactly as Chomsky does.

Conspiracy does not explain this degree of unanimity of opinion in the face of facts clearly to the contrary, but Chomsky's own propaganda model does (see Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, Manufacturing Consent, NY: Panteon, 1988). One variation of this model, as Michael Albert has made clear in recent articles in Z, this magazine, is that conspiracy theory is incompatible with "institutional" or "structural" theory. That this distinction is spurious, and counterproductive for progressive goals, becomes clear with one example. The CIA (Operations, at least) is by definition a conspiracy, and at the same time a structural part of the US government, i.e. an institutionalized conspiracy. When Garrison, Stone et al. say the President was removed by the military-industrial-intelligence complex because he was getting in the way of their war plans (or was perceived to be getting in the way), what could be more "structural"?

If the withdrawal policy reversal is now entering the realm of permissible knowledge (e.g. Arthur Schlesinger, Roger Hilsman), some version of the propangada model, which includes truths and half-truths as well as lies, will explain this too, just as it will explain why CIA (Colby) endorses a book by an Army intelligence officer (Newman) that apparently supports the coup d'état theory, and why a film such as JFK was produced by the world's biggest propaganda machine (Time Warner). As always, the realm of permissible knowledge is infused with smoke and mirrors.

Which brings me to the document Chomsky attaches so much importance to, the Bundy draft of NSAM 273, supposedly showing that Johnson's Vietnam policy was virtually identical to Kennedy's. Bundy, as National Security Adviser, was the highest common denominator in the intelligence community in the Kennedy-Johnson transition--above even CIA, and far above Johnson. Whatever the nation's darkest secrets were on November 22, 1963, it was Bundy who filled Johnson in on them, not vice versa. Now, after a quarter of a century, just as Garrison, Stone et al. are bringing the question of the relation between the assassination and Vietnam to a head, a Bundy document appears that ostensibly proves (for Chomsky) that there was no change in policy. How convenient.

In fact the Bundy draft can be seen as supporting any one of several contradictory analyses, which I'm sure is exactly the way the smoke and mirrors artists at Langley like to have things. If you take NSAM 273 and the Bundy draft at face value, as Chomsky does, they prove there was no change in the withdrawal policy, as explicitly stated in paragraph 2. If you take that as a lie, and the other paragraphs (6-8) as an implicit reversal of the withdrawal policy, as Peter Scott and Arthur Schlesinger do, they prove that either Kennedy reversed

his own policy, or Johnson reversed it, depending on whether you believe Bundy wrote the draft for Kennedy or for Johnson (meaning, in the latter case, that Bundy was part of the coup). To this must be added the question of the authenticity of the Bundy draft (worth asking, considering the circumstances), and the question (unanswerable) of whether Kennedy would have approved it, since he never saw it or discussed it with Bundy.

Here again, Chomsky is beating a straw man. One need not prove that Johnson reversed the policy with NSAM 273 to prove that he reversed it. All we need for the latter is the PP and all the documents, including Bundy's draft, taken at face value, which prove that withdrawal was official U.S. policy in November 1963, and that Johnson began abandoning that policy the following month. Chomsky's Camelot debunking, on target as it may be in some respects, cannot obscure this fact, and should not distract us from the enormously important question that Garrison, Stone and many others are asking.